

AGORAPHONICA

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by

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February 2010

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Virginia Michelle Heatter holds an Associate of Arts degree from County College of Morris in Randolph, New Jersey and a Bachelor of Arts from Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Her poems have appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Third Coast*, *Fugue*, *Cranky*, *32 Poems*, *Swink Online*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and other literary magazines. She is the co-author with A.J.

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For Jacinda, who makes me crazy and keeps me sane.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Warmest thanks to my special committee members Alice Fulton and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Immeasurable gifts: your insights, encouragement, advice, and examples. My gratitude to J. Robert Lennon for publishing “Sappho’s Fragment 31 (Homophonic Translation)” at The Litlab, an experimental writing blog; and for introducing me to some of my favorite fiction writers. For constantly making The Program a real writing community, endless thanks are owed to Alice, Lyrae, and John, as well as Stephanie Vaughn, Michael Koch, Ken McClane, Helena Viramontes, and Bob Morgan. To Allison Barrett, Christopher Kempf, Jennifer Ray, Will Cordeiro, Justin Souza, Jared Harel, Anne Marie Rooney, Christopher Lirette, Zachary Harris, and Michael Canavan, a loud *merci* for being such generous readers and critics. Finally, grateful acknowledgement is due to the James McConkey Summer Fellowship in Creative Writing for financial support that made completion of this manuscript possible.

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RADIO NOWHERE · IN SPRING

*I listened all day to garage-music:
old roof snow, heavy-bottomed with melt and freeze...*

A.R. Ammons, "Lollapalooza"

* * *

as if April alone should
drug anyone out of
silence · just

because snow melt
& mud beak—
Pavlovian

my sleep
wrecks itself
with blossoms

& the bitch sun
woozes up
a starker country

* * *

what I have to mind · ready like that · is a hollow
functioning · a pulling down
crabapples to trim a crown of welded nickels
and nothing · to coronate ... days jam in me
like failed copies · like pallor ice
like bottoms out with a smack to the gut
and rises up · birdspeak ... one frequency's a bridge
too nowhere to burn · another's snowing headlines
back into their news holes ... I've eaten six rolls
of tinfoil today & still
no dance music

in a mood like · this orange moth · on the wrong
side of the screen · unable to find the gap through
which it entered ...

but the storms keep · tracking east with
threat of severe winds · threat of severe lightning
bruising hail ...

* * *

Out of the mouth · tumbling · like a tongue
leaking mercury · a silvery mess · hooking sound to sound
to silence · this trickster season's trickster chorus of
birds · and the dream flights they induce · bees
with atomic bombs in their bellies · dandelions squatting
wherever they like …

I damp my heart with both hands.
They juke their little fugues out louder.

* * *

O daughter of prophesy · daughter
of transcendence · bramble-hopping · loved
the fizz-winged bee & left him

O speaking · in tongues · in opposite mouths
hard up against · the plastic clapboard
loved the way he bit & let him

Tomgirl with a hot Ouija board · glass eye
on the omen · loved to love
the way he stung &

O

damned if you do · and if you do · and if you please
and if you please · please, do

* * *

which is to say, I desire

something like · putting fingers on
like palpitating · sweet apple · sweet
knot of fiber & pectin · sweet star of
cross-sectioned seeds ...

do you remember · the delve

that beautiful · green nothing · that
weekend · so fast · so wasted · on talk
& so · the salvage of listening ...
tell me,

how much architecture must we be
& what ratio of weightlessness to devotion?

O · I don't know · because the geometry
fucking escapes me · where
humility becomes humiliation · when
to keep my silly mouth shut · what
it might mean to hold on to

my wits as the hive overflows with honey
Anne Carson says · *all will be*
blank again · says · *Enlightenment*
is useless and nothing
replaces the sting of love ...

& O · how I'd love to say · I love you,
Anne Carson, but you're wrong
... never mind this
fat red lonely heart
& its emotional noise pollution

* * *

in a mood like · imagining · I love you
whoever you are · love you getting into
your music · out of Standard Time · love
your hands · their *liebeswerk* · their press
pluck · pound · pushing buttons · pursing lips
love · whatever · it is you do to make · the air
there · drum back your own ears · & ...

O · never mind · my winter lungs · their shards
of frosted harpsichord · their loves best that loves
in theory · vague · and maybe · insincerely

*

O · make me · do
to want to hammer up a space for us
to echo in · to want · to build it up right here
to plane the syntax · plumb the lines
right here & here & · like it too
this amateur carpentry · building
& building toward · nothing you could live in
if it rained · or if the ozone depletion
tore your town asunder

*

But what kind · of house · & what kind
of You? · What kinds of · kindness & address?

*

O You

Tube · & You · report the news · & Facebook maybe · Flickr · blog
or Twitter · You

sitting here beside me on the #81 · to whom I cannot say hello · but
awkward & all

the crowded world's a crowded stage · these days · & O me too · &
my unholy mouth

* * *

because I too bear the dual shames of
spectatorship & display · temporarily

I too · I've · fouled the caress of
a photograph whose intended subject I was not

ruined something with my unhappiness
when my happiness would have done just as well

· · · · · meanwhile · · · · ·

what are these gears · this chugging
climactory · that any quarter-turn could

& suddenly · seize
the whole thing up with joy

AUTOPORTRAITS

* * *

Brewed up in a star machine
with no parts but its own products—
that genealogy · that

how the mind tells itself
must be like light · and how
the mind is · must be

I think · the pre-life of
hydrogens · the scatter and flock
the broadcast and cluster

think: numbered spheres
in a glass tank—and is this
fugitive · my lucky one?

* * *

How unlike · skin or soap or
a vaguely promissored

happiness: the cold
neither howls · nor whispers

doesn't even groan · but shuts
itself up and waits for heat

to shoulder in
its aimless meteorology

so easy · and so infrequently
terminal—

one blue point on a star arm
in the middle of everywhere

microbes dinosaurs sapiens
my black cat

what a flea can accomplish
with one pump of its thighs

how the moon remains
a one-sense pony

the table of elements
a pink volcanic soda blast

Autoportrait

after Edouard Levé

When I open my eyes in the morning, every morning, the first thing I think is: *What desire will I satisfy by getting out of bed?* In the sunlight and white cinderblock bedroom, it's work not craving drywall. A cigarette and a cup of coffee are the first and second things I need to do every day. When my neighbor asks to borrow my microwave, I remind myself of my father. That insane need for privacy. Speaking is a manifestation of the belief that at least one other human being cares. Writing is not. Reading about other people's vacations makes me think I should stop reading about other people's vacations. Birthdays and anniversaries. Reading about the open sewers in a New Delhi slum makes me feel ashamed and not ashamed enough about my own life choice. I do not lying in bed awake unless I am reading or... I resent the ubiquity of adolescent fantasies in the marketplace. There's this recurring dream in which my dear, exotic pet—a panther sometimes, sometimes tiger or elephant—has turned suddenly vicious. And yet I believe it will not hurt me if I can intuit its desires. Sometimes, but not often, the blandest acquaintances turn up in my dreams as husbands or lovers. I have never acted on these misfires. Awake, I prefer time at its edges. Once, talking across pillows with a man I loved, he said, *I'm afraid someday you'll leave me for someone smarter.* Another time, talking across pillows with a man I loved, he said, *I'm afraid someday you'll leave me for someone smarter.* I'm not nearly as smart as my loneliness suggests. Once upon a time, Paris thundered back from its silence as I said yes and yes beneath the shimmer of the Eiffel Tower. Because love is the universal home team. When I think about what the present does to the past, I worry the best day of my life may already be unrecognizable.

* * *

Give me a forest · to wander in · full soul
dodging foam drops · from alert bright helicopters.

Where water is · and floods are · and sogged postulates
cool as washcloths · there fever dives

heartward · dangerous · whistle-steaming
platelets through flaking valves.

Give me · dried leaves instead · and time
enough to Rorschach up · some blue-hot monument.

If I am · surface as · a clam spit birthstone
why did my mind go · boatsick

when the surgeon · shucked open
my abdomen & fished out a daughter?

* * *

I am · not Sam · not · Jill-not-Jane-not-joking ^(*really) · I am
stowed away on a doomed orbiter of my own making
and style myself Captain · because the sham

feels pretty good · because under the hood · a distributor cam
sparks to my will sometimes · and also · because this aching:
*I am · not Sam · not · Jill-not-Jane-not-joking ^(*really) · I am.*

And the wheels on my Challenger go · round-and-ram
round-and-ram · and though Houston says: *We're breaking*
up · I refuse to cede the Captain's seat · because a clever sham

might outwit the autopilot after all · because there's a golden gram
of endorphin in the glove box · right here for the taking:
*I am · not Sam · not · Jill-not-Jane-not-joking ^(*really) · I am.*

Mmmm. Go at throttle up. Go at engines piercing the radiation dam,
picknicking just enough atmosphere to survive the trip. Go at staking
claim to the Captain's embarrassment · of switches · because a *sham*

of blue light · trapping all the people you love · and can't · is anagram
for *a humble flight so* · go at shaking off · the dread of waking—
I am · not Sam · not · Jill-not-Jane-not-joking. Really, I am
Captain of a launch sequence in action, bent on breathtaking shame.

Plus or minus the sensation of never falling
 ± trip ± recover ± trip ± recover ± trip ±
 One night she kept on walking :: up↑ up↑ &

OUT

right through the

because she hunched the real
event horizon was anything but singular
... a stadium effect ...



|stars feeding stars feeding amps feeding back
until the long white umbilicus yerked her



*“Mommy, wake up.
Wake up, Mommy.”*

* * *

I wanted to shimmer like goldfish
but came up swan.
Poor me.
Poor back carved out for boat.
And lovers kiss & lovers kiss & they forget
to thank me for my buoyancy.
And lovers tangle genitals in the dark beneath down.
Was anything ever so warm?

I wanted to muck the canvas
but came up clean,
a half-hearted penitent
with a Cubist's eye for culpability.
And lovers sin & confessors absolve & they forget
to thank me for my ambivalence.
And pilgrims lay spearmint at the feet of the Madonna.
Was anything ever so anodyne?

I wanted to lung air like a famous soprano
but came up ordinary.
Whatever you think you hear on the other side
of the shower wall, I hear it too.
And lovers howl & divas labor & they forget
to thank my throat's tin physics.
And rebel birds twine webs between tread & riser.
Was anything ever so anchor?

LOVE STORIES

* * *

Here
goes · is
always going
is a man on bended
knee · offering you a model
escalator as valentine · says it's
the best he could do on short notice
and it works. With a little winding · any
strange might be conveyance. Here, stretch your
finger. With a little strange · any winding might be
the engine you never knew you were. I placed a valentine
in Tennessee. I photographed it in Georgia. I found a wide-
mouthed bottle and left it smouldering in the sand at Pleasure Beach.

* * *

She was solemn as an owl at first. Tempted but trying to remain quietly enarmored beneath sensible plumage. He wagged his birdsilk eyes beneath her window. *So, this is how evolution thwarts pragmatism*, she thought. Her heart engorged with peahen longing, her thin legs shuddering like vestigial motors, she leaned in toward the bone song of his rattling quills. *Just a transient moment of angular dependence*, she told herself. But no matter which way she tilted her head, the barbules shot back iridescence. And then it caught her eye: the parametric equation, circle rotated about a circle to plum the pupil just so. He shivered his bright mural. *Our sons will be torn claw from crest by leopards*, she said, *and yet...*

* * *

He loved her with the big headlight of his love. On their first date, he took her to the beach and illuminated her with a wattage so fierce it blinded deckhands in the harbor. With the big headlight of his love, he morsed couplets across her face and across the faces of crewmen eavesdropping the heat of his love on their cheeks. On their second date, the home team scored the winning run when the big headlight of his love distracted the centerfielder. A few weeks later, they spent a long weekend in New York, and he bought tickets to a Broadway show, where she starred in the big headlight of his love. Later, they stood at the top of the Empire State Building while prop planes smoked MARRY ME in the big headlight of his love over Jersey. Honeymooning in Europe, the big headlight of his love burned her shadow into the wall of a cave near some Paleolithic buffalo. In the big headlight of his love, their first son rocketed down the birth canal into his father's arms. He was a big boy, that Junior. And bright.

* * *

on a table looking in · toward tomography as mirror
because he was a good liar, perhaps
because leashed dove & diamond collar
because generosity begins this close

self-portrait as self-portrait as seen by matchlight

to resist no · to affirm · to go along · to get along · a long time
on a beach with no cover · & so burn
like saltwound · like sulfur · stink of match
yes stink · yes there · yes touch

had to talk herself into · had to breathe
godwords · into O · into ear · into air
had to loyal the ground first · strike fire · prove match

on a beach looking out · toward the world curving away
& gravity's inward pull · & so much water
because spark of compartmented ocean
because "the sum of all currents entering the node
is equal to the sum of all currents leaving the node"

self-portrait as self-portrait as seen by PET light.

Sappho's Fragment 31 (Homophonic Translation)

Faint I Mock Enough, is as They I Sin(n/g)ing—
Even over hot is {In}sane th^{is} Toying.
Done is I with Pleasure: *Adieu, Phony!*
That is, AWAY go!

Kind of Glacier in here, the Owing to Ma('am)(an)—
Cardigan & Stealth—this is deft Erasing.
O Scar IS—I do broach it—O me Phony,
Sudden [&] Achy.

All the Cameramen, all the Glossy slept on—
Nautic Chrome for upending Dramakinds Eyes.
O but This we Do & so More a'Home peer,
(by) Sea or by Talkie:

Cock the mirror's *catchingness*! Cheat I (TRAUMA
PASSION · GREED) if Clorox® the Terra? *Poias*,
We who naked, oily & "Going twice" &
Feigning the Autism—

All up in *die Tollhäuser* play Piñatas.

* * *

Having meant it · matters not at all · that I did
mean it · that I was · sincere · only makes me
want to dismantle the thing · tear the sound
from the sense · hide · a few screws so that it
cannot be reassembled · but love is like
a shatterproof · Klein bottle: no rivets · no
welds · no dowels · no dovetails · non-orientable
by any act of will

Chaos Malediction

May the ocean keep
 harassing the beach at Nauset
 the thick hoar of constellations there
 say nothing · affirm
nothing · dis-appoint [de-name · you
 de-authorize · the harp-star
 belvedere you hubrised to yourself]

May the senseless libida
 of a metalmark · tip
 the vortex · against
 [you] · a toilet flushed
in Tristan da Cunha · splutter you
 preludes & preludes—

AGORAPHONICA

“I got to be pickin’ at it an’ workin’ at it until I got it all tore down. Here I got the sperit sometimes an’ nothin’ to preach about. I got the call to lead the people, an’ no place to lead ‘em.”

“Lead ‘em around and around...Sling ‘em in the irrigation ditch. Tell ‘em they’ll burn in hell if they don’t think like you. What the hell you want to lead ‘em someplace for? Jus’ lead ‘em.”

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

* * *

She saw the April flower · had no need
of ethics · early petals pushed clean up
from bloodroot · bride face turned sky-
ward · jeweled with ice grit. She saw
the god-slap wind could pink no cheek
and no cheek rage against the gust.

* * *

We had an idea, Little Boy
like 10 to the power of 10 to the power of
100 pregnant dendrites. We had the best minds
of the greatest generation firing
across the synapse at Oak Ridge
& the synapse at Cottonwoods
& the synapse at Richland.
Your Self, Little Boy
is “a very complex pattern of
synaptic connectivity in your brain.”
Think for Us, Little Boy. Think.

* * *

A child is such a strange
 little womb fruit,
 though afterward I was
 the one who looked
 like Frankenstein's baby—
gut stuff here & there trying to push
 through gaps in the staples.

Throw down your umbilical noose, Mommy.

My little boy wants
to sacralize his undoing in advance, reenact
 the constitutional bang—
 rockets' red glare & all that.
He wants every plum in every icebox
 for breakfast · & whom am I
to throw irons around his hunger?

An Open Letter to Jim Purdue

	I	
	have	
	to stop	
	eating your	
	chickens now	
	which, though they	
	made	the
	bones	I walk
	on	made
	a mess	of the
	Chesa	peake
	Bay	too.
	I don't	know
	what	it's like
	to pluck	money
	from the	land or
	to gather	it up in
	buckets	at the
	terminus	of the
	American	family
	watershed.	But I do
	know what	its like to
	wish with	my thumb
	on a greasy	bone, to
	wrestle, to	win the
	larger share	and still
	the wish	will not
	come	true. No
	longer	Yours,
	Vir-	ginia

* * *

so much depends
upon

the magnitude of
the giving up—

as a child, I gave
up chocolate for

Lent, and still
a million people

died of war-
famine, global

dimming, drought.
And still

the vulture-stalked,
starving child

feels, when I look
at the famous

photograph,
like the recurring

nightmare, in which
over dinner

I realize
I have forgotten

my daughter
at the grocery store

* * *

The bees collapsed and then the house
of cards. Straight flush & dried out
honey workers fluttering in the —

I cannot see the wind but feel it whip
my skin. Cannot taste any warning
in a colony of *Salmonella typhimurium*.

And all those glittering dividends
trickling up from our lives:
What do those sound like?

Miscarriage

unlucky Spartan · tucked
 into the wet concave of
jelly shield · my soft belly no
 refuge from
the anonymity you briefly
 despised · the curve
 of your not-yet
spine no armor against—

Wily child

NEW ITHACA

Purloin Squared

It started with a cherry net improvised
for swiping fruit from the neighbors' trees.
Wood & twine. That's how she caught me—

crouched in her bedroom
with my hands on the handle of her
implement of abduction.

There was a seam of streetlight
framing the curtains. A seem of cars stopping
in the street below

drivers craning their ears to catch the sound of
tenants kneeling at heating vents & billboards
in Times Square holding their sparks.

What happens next?
How does the woman with fruit-stained fingers
conjure cop & robber in a single virtuoso
demonstration of persona?

Maybe she cracks
a ceramic pig against the windowsill.
Maybe the coins make their own weather.

Maybe the blithe in her laughter represents
a bold evolution in the theory of jurisprudence.

Lullaby

her body is doing · it again · about again
to loose itself into bullets
to amanuensis friction
 into fire · again · into

why is not the hard question
but how · to trick her · saltpeter
 into the rain—

why is the mundane · amputations
we all suffer · the rhythm
 of sawteeth on bone

of sawteeth · through marrow
again · her body is about · again
to asynchronize

itself · defend · itself against
dismemberments clotted
already · to stumps

Come out into the storm, girl
& bring your Spanish guitar—

Hypnoniopædia

It's an ultrasymbolical sleep
narrative · this · diving the discount bins
@ Valley Fair · & clearance
bins @ Woolworth's
& plastic-crap-filled bins @ Wal*Mart—

never to find · and I know it
a set of matching · hands to match
the ticking yellowed face
of the second-hand
eternity piece · Look, god, no hands!

It's all minutes here
the hours · being locked · onto
velveteen cardboard · under gleaming
display glass · & the key doing
its bellsong against · counter & cash drawer &

wristwatch · swinging
from an elastic bracelet · coiled around
a woman's *articulatio radiocarpalis*—
same height · same
haircolor · as me · same dry-clean-only, laundered-anyway

burnt-shiny @ the steam-ironed seams black pantsuit
I wore in her occupation.
But I can see · from her clerkish half-stare
doppelgänger or no · she'll open
the case for me: like hell.

Storage Organs

It becomes you then · suddenly isn't · anymore
about the delicate symbol in · suddenly · side your pink
cochlea · isn't becoming · or · a living relic turned
on its side · for storage · big as furniture · becomes
the sound · remembered · of Taps · water and bass · and
mother you are · that much is true

*

There were days like furniture that can't be remembered anymore—
days lined with beige synthetics and the television flashing primary
colors. Everything was stain then · even the nightlight

*

My grandmother burned · an onion on the gas stove · for good
luck in the new year · shall it become us · this December
burning · root vegetable · to make · some suddenly continuous
this · turned on its fire side · this layer one · animal · mineral
vegetable · life?

The Seam of Colorlessness That Binds Blue Fire to Orange

Whether so clear · and I happened to be
on the patio · the moon so moon the trees · cast shadows
on the lawn · makes no difference · (or is that a lie?)
than had my line of · sight been capped · by weather ...

It was no place · to make myself unself-
conscious · for seeing · not even the downed leaves
which looked like · frost ... But what was I expecting?
that morning too · the trunk damped overnight · to black
leaves brighter · than any metaphor · for yellow · stunning

... that's all it was · a sensual moment over · coffee
before the home's other selves · interrupted with their waking
the pure pause · (or is this a lie too?) · of
touch, taste, hear, think, smell

makes no difference now · I am keeping · a fire on the patio
in the modest pit · beneath the fully visible · moon · now down
the street the neighbor's · blue and white lights · seem to
shudder where flames convulse the air above them.

The Penelope Hours

I.

A lattice-box of not-quite · house
 this porch is · jutting
into the not-quite · nature of a rented backyard
 & four below zero · tonight
 ice water in the neighbor's chimes

I've sat here · deep into winter's coldest
 hours · like 3am · insomniac · listening
to the wind approximate · waterfalls in the tall pines
 to its big breath · sounds that sound · like
 fractals of my own · the ocean's

sat behind lattice · that would splinter
 my fingers if I ran my fingers over it
behind one more visible · untouchable
 structure · in a crystal-shop world · sat wondering
 lurching · I mean speechless slipped grasp of—

For what I can most say to you · is you · listening
for you · as has always been · my own love · my habit

II.

Night flows overhead · like a fetal heartbeat · in slow audio
over the porch · through · jetstream · thermosphere · solar
system · oort cloud · spiral band · milky way · local group

noticed, things take on such priority & proportions
like the naked · Christmas tree still · leaned into the corner
though the calendar says March ... Is it possible then

ever · to avoid feeling · like a body · stuffed into looking
glass · potions in the blood that · shrivel this · balloon that
catalyzed by eyes merely · passing over · and passing · away

III.

Feels like the moon · feels like
white-fingered clinging to the surface

peering down from a crater's lip
at earth: *hello, everyone*

but even the amateur astronomers · working
their separate telescopes · on separate rooftops

in separate backyards · alien neighborhoods
tonight · tonight · tomorrow · and for reasons

beyond speculation or summary · being
human · and therefore · exponentially

less scrutable · than any heavenly
body ... I'm not even a strange

shadow in their digital photographs · though weirder
to myself · and to my co-sleepers · under that

tenuous blue linen than · those Twins · their
Clownface Nebula ... look again · maybe that isn't

a bow · after all · and Orion isn't killing anything
only dancing a dance so slow · it can't be plotted

IV.

I tried to write a poem
in which I called these *Penelope Hours*

let my fingers raw · all night at the big fake shroud · waiting
for some sudden · rightness to strike · me satisfied · thinking

*how much sweeter the unworking would be
without daylight looming on both fronts*

... except it wasn't even beautiful
abstract overblown expressionist pathetic pastiche.

If my own body can't do it · can't twin this *am* · can't
even dye its eyes to match its mind · this · *I* and *me*

our sometimes fucked-up · sometimes felicitous
double-orbit · less predictable than weather · we seem

hurtled and hurtling · through hour after hour · neither of us
able to take · nor to relinquish · control

Penelope, the yard is empty tonight.
That was another life · having anything to defend · or to offer.

V.

And yet there is · no life at all · outside
the salvage yard · junk lush as bluegrass · the spring-torn
leatherette · continuous with our own
decay: *Buy new! Buy more! Buy often!* Buy me
wildflowers · will you? · or simply bide · here ten minutes
inside this maze of exhausted metal · Look!
I found you · a timing belt · a gudgeon pin · a rusted
shifter · that still works

NOTES

In “which is to say, I desire” the italicized lines are from “The Anthropology of Water” by Anne Carson.

“Autoportrait: *after Edouard Levé*” mimics the style and tone of a piece by the same name which appeared, translated from the French by Lorin Stein, in the March 2008 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

The paraphrase of Kirchhoff’s Current Law in “on a table looking in” is excerpted from a Wikipedia article.

An explanation of the homophonic translation method in “Sappho’s Fragment 31” may be found at Charles Bernstein’s “Wreading Experiments” (<http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/wreading-experiments.html>).

The quoted text in “We had an idea, Little Boy” is from an interview with Joseph LeDoux that appeared in the October 8, 2002 edition of *The New York Times*. Dr. LeDoux is a professor of neuroscience and author of the book *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*. Thanks to Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon for the link.

The line “*Throw down your umbilical noose,*” in “A child is such a strange” is from the song “Heart-Shaped Box” by Nirvana.

The poems beginning with the lines “Plus or minus the sensation of never falling,” “We had an idea, Little Boy,” and “A child is such a strange” first appeared in *Blue Line to Wonderland*. They were written for *(co)ludere*, a constraint-based collaborative performance series curated by Divya Victor under the auspices of the Poetics Plus Program at SUNY University at Buffalo.